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ABSTRACT

A study surveyed communication apprehension (CA) among the college student population. Persons in higher education are concerned about determining whether or not sufficient assistance is available to students for whom communication apprehension appears to be problematic. Subjects, 2,377 students in speech classes on 11 campuses of The Pennsylvania State University, were administered the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24, a 24-item Likert-type scale which measures trait-like apprehension in four contexts: groups, formal meetings, two-party conversation, and public speaking. Results indicated that apprehensive students were more likely to: (1) attend Commonwealth campuses rather than University Park; (2) be in their freshman or sophomore year; (3) choose Science, Health and Human Development, or Education majors rather than Liberal Arts and Communications majors; and (4) to have not taken high school speech. (Twenty-nine notes are included.) (RAE)

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Communication Apprehension: Student Demographic Characteristics at The Pennsylvania State University

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Abstract

Studies surveying college student populations suggest approximately 20% of students in major universities may experience the inhibiting effects of communication apprehension. Persons in higher education are concerned about determining whether or not sufficient assistance is available to students for whom communication apprehension appears to be problematic. This study assessed 2,377 students in speech classes on eleven campuses of The Pennsylvania State University. Results indicated that apprehensive students were more likely to: attend Commonwealth campuses than University Park; be in their freshmen or sophomore year; choose Science, Health and Human Development, and Education majors more and are less likely to choose Liberal Arts and Communications majors; and to have not taken high school speech.

Communication Apprehenion: Student Demographic Characteristics at The Pennsylvania State University

Communication apprehension (CA), the fear and avoidance of speaking with another person or persons, has been found to affect as much as 20% of the college speech population. This inhibiting characteristic appears to be related to longevity as a student in college, learning styles, communication interaction habits, perceptions by peers and teachers, grades and academic achievement, and choice of major and subsequent occupations.[1]

This survey examines the extent to which apprehension among students in speech classes at The Pennsylvania State University appears to exist. Such information may prove useful in determining whether or not sufficient assistance is available to students for whom communication apprehension appears to be problematic. Although the study is restricted to one population, it is reasonable to assume that the findings would be similar for comparable public institutions.

The communication apprehensive student appears to have difficulty staying in college. McCroskey and Payne[2] report that in their sample, as compared to the drop-out rate of 23.9% for low apprehensive students, by the end of the second year the CA student drop-out rate was 32.7%. Moreover, the CA student who

continues in school often drops or postpones taking the speech class before the junior or senior year and then may drop out of school before that requirement is met.[3]

Those students who experience high levels of CA appear to have particular learning habits. They prefer large lecture classes and avoid personalized types of learning situations and instances of tutoring and advising by instructors.[4] In classes, CA students choose seats away from areas of interaction and become less involved in class activity.[5] Other students perceive them as non-assertive, risk-avoiders, co-operative, non-directive, 'go-along' persons, uncommunicative, hard-to-know, and cool.[6] Teachers expect the highly apprehensive student to have lower overall academic achievement, less satisfcatory relationships with others, and lower probablilty of success in future education than their less apprehensive peers.[7]

Although a student may choose a major because of interest, experience, aptitude, evidence of skills, and a variety of other reasons, the CA's choice of major may be made for reasons similar to choice of occupations, specifically limited involvement in communication. Because of low involvement in communication, the CA person experiences distinct disadvantages in the workplace. CA persons are perceived to be less competent, projected to be less successful on the job, to require more job training, and to be less satisfied on the job. They have been shown to be less likely to be offered an interview, to accept a position with lower pay and status than to take one with higher communication requirements, and to stay on the job half as long as persons with low CA.[8] Un-

fortunately, the CA student may choose a certain major and subsequent occupation because of the infrequency of communication it requires.

Highly apprehensive college students are found to achieve less in the academic setting.[9] McCroskey and Andersen found correlations of CA with lower over-all college grade-point averages, and graduating high school CA students evidenced lower achievement on standardized tests and received lower grades in small classes.[10] Experiences students have in the earlier academic setting may also affect success or failure in college classes. CA students have been found to develop negative attitudes toward school in both junior and senior high school.[11] It appears that avoidance of interaction with peers, teachers, and speaking events may severely limit the CA student's success in college classes and in interpersonal relationships.

Studies which include comparisons of gender-related CA suggest the magnitude of differences between CA and gender to be so small as to be inconsequential. The direction appears to depend heavily on the particular operationalization used to assess the individual's anxiety. In a study of the impact of biological sex on general communication apprehension and on broad communication contexts, females tended to be somewhat more apprehensive about public speaking than males, but females and males did not differ meaningfully in terms of general communication apprehension.[12] In a study linking anxiety to a person's psychological sex type, however, highly feminine subjects of either sex have been found to be more

apprehensive than either androgynous or masculine subjects.[13] Richmond and McCroskey,[14] in their discussion of individual communication differences, suggest that gender-related CA differences are more associated with experiences and environment than with specific gender.

To explore amounts of apprehension in the variables just discussed, subjects in the study were asked to indicate: (1) location of campus, (2) year in school, (3) speech class option in which enrolled (Option A, Public Speaking; Option B, Group Discussion; Option C, Rhetorical Criticism), (4) college in which enrolled, (5) degree status, (6) whether or not they had taken high school speech, and (7) gender.

Method

Seventeen instructors in Speech Communication from the Allentown, Altoona, Beaver, Berks, Delaware, Fayette, McKeesport, Ogontz, Schuylkill, Wilkes-Barre, and University Park campuses of The Pennsylvania State University participated in the study. These teachers administered the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 to 2,377 students in speech classes in September, 1986.

The PRCA-24, a 24-item Likert-type scale measures trait-like apprehension in four contexts: groups, formal meetings, two-party conversation, and public speaking.[15] Alpha reliabilities of the PRCA-24 have ranged from .92 to .97 for the total score.[16]

For the study, in the range of 34 to 124, low communication apprehension was designated as an overall score of below 55; normal as an overall score of 55-76; above average as 77-83; and

high apprehension was designated as an overall score of 84 or higher. Pearson chi-squares were computed to compare numbers of CA students in each variable.

Results

Significantly more speech apprehensive students attend Commonwealth Campuses than University Park (χ^2=11.76;df=1; $p < .001$). There were significantly more CA students in the freshmen group than in the junior or senior groups, but not more than in the sophomore group (χ^2=3.28;df=1;$p < .06$). Sophomore groups contained more CA students that junior and senior groups, but not more than the freshman group (χ^2=4.37;df=1;$p < .03$).

No significant differences were found among numbers of CA students enrolled in Option A, Public Speaking, Option B, Group Discussion, and Option C, Rhetorical Criticism.

The Colleges of Science, Health and Human Development, and Education had significantly more CA students than did Liberal Arts and Communications (χ^2=12.17;df=1;$p < .001$).

Numbers of CA students in Provisional and Associate degrees, Provisional and Baccalaureate degrees did not differ, but significant differences were found between numbers of enrollees in the Associate and Baccaulaureate degrees, with most numbers of apprehensive students in the Associate degree (χ^2=11.76;df=1;$p < .001$).

Numbers of CA students who had taken high school speech were found to be significantly lower than students who had not (χ^2=12.89;df=1;$p < .001$). No differences in numbers of CA students were found between males and females.

Discussion

Significant findings indicated that the CA student in this population was more likely to: attend a Commonwealth Campus rather than University Park; appear more among freshmen and sophomore groups than junior and senior groups; to major in Science, Health and Human Development, and Education than in Liberal Arts and Communications; enroll in the Associate more than the Baccalaureate and Provisional degree programs; and to have not taken high school speech. Differences in Option or speech class and gender were not significant.

The finding that proportionately more CA students attend PSU Commonwealth Campuses than University Park needs further examination. Students are assigned to campuses in three ways. First, of the 75% who choose University Park, 15% are assigned contingent on academic standing while the remaining 60% of applicants are assigned their second choice, Commonwealth Campuses. Although studies show CA students achieve less academically,[17] in this study academic achievement levels were not explored and hence, cannot be used to explain the difference. An explanation that does seem reasonable, however, is that the CA student may realize the need for more self-assurance when attending the University Park campus and to be among the 25% who make a Commonwealth Campus their first choice. Additionally, nearness to home, small campuses, and friends also attending the campuses may deter the apprehensive student from the effort of establishing new relationships and life habits on a larger, more impersonal campus such as University Park.

Consistent with findings related to student drop-out rates,[18]

this study showed significant numbers of CA students to be among freshmen and sophomore groups. For purposes of retention, this period of time may be crucial in the academic life of a CA student. Opportunities for assistance by advisors and CA alleviation programs would be especially important at this time.

Choice of colleges, those of Science, Health and Human Development, and Education, by CA students may indicate that these students are attracted to occupations that they perceive as requiring less oral performance or activity or is less threatening to them in some way; for example, McCroskey, Andersen, Richmond, and Wheeless [17] have found negative relationships between CA and teachers, particularly teachers in in elementary grades. The inhibition of CA may cause students to enroll in these majors and enter subsequent occupations whereas without the limitation of CA, the student may choose a major and occupation more suited to his or her skills and aptitude. Since research shows the CA individual to accomplish less and be less satisfied in the workplace, there may be a relationship between an inappropriate choice of major and occupation and future job related dissatisfaction.

More CA students in this study chose the Associate degree which requires less time to complete than the Baccalaureate degree. Again, an inherent tendency to withdraw from communication interaction may make the shorter degree program more attractive to students who experience this problem.

Non-involvement in a high school speech class appears to be a notable factor for the apprehensive student since a

significantly smaller number of these students had taken a high school speech class. This finding may be of particular interest to elementary and secondary educators for several reasons. Possible relationships to the finding may include: first, prevention of CA through prevention/alleviation programs in the elementary and junior high school grades could be beneficial in relationship to future academic and life experiences; second, by avoiding the high school speech class, the CA student may perpetuate early development of poor academic attitudes and achievement found to be related to CA; third, the high school speech experience may be instrumental in lessening communication apprehension in higher education. Further research in this area may be helpful to understanding this problem.

McKinney[20] found reticent students at The Pennsylvania State University to enroll more in Option B, than in Option A. This choice would seem reasonable since emphasis in Option A is on public speaking and in Option B is on Group Discussion. Faced with the requirement of taking a speech class, the reticent student may prefer the safety of communicating in the group rather than the uncertainty giving public speeches. However, the present study showed no differences in CA student choice of the Option. At first glance, the finding may seem confusing, however. The McKinney study deals with reticent University Park students only, and this study examined choices of both University Park and Commonwealth Campus communication apprehensive students. Additionally, the definitions of students designated as reticent and communication apprehensive are distinct. Reticence is

operationalized as a trait of an individual which results in the individual characteristically remaining silent rather than participating in communication [21] and is identified by the individual's response to a description of reticence during a screening interview. Communication apprehension, on the other hand is the fear and anxiety associated with communication and is measured by the PRCA-24. Since this study is concerned with communication apprehension rather than reticence, the findings may not be comparable to the McKinney study.

Additionally, several of the Commonwealth Campuses in the study show course schedules which list Speech Communication 100 without distinguishing the Option. Moreover, several of the Campuses offer only Option A. Given these intervening variables, it appears difficult to substantiate and explain the finding.

Gender differences did not appear to be a factor in the study, as almost an equal number of females and males showed CA. This tendency supports general research conclusions that acculturation, rather than biology, is a more meaningful predictor of CA.

The findings of the study may have general implications along three lines. First, awareness by administrators of the existence of communication apprehension and of the difficulties experienced by CA students in relating to the academic setting is important. These difficulties may determine the success or failure of speech apprehensive students in accomplishing their academic goals and the retention or attrition of these students. Second, additional awareness of academic choices and learning habits would help faculty and advisors to offer assistance to

communication apprehensive student. Third, in order to help these students cope with this problem, programs for alleviating communication apprehension have been developed to alleviate specific speech concerns.[22] According to the individual's type of speech concern rational emotive therapy has been found to be helpful in alleviating negative cognitive appraisal;[23] systematic desensitization for alleviation of conditioned speech anxiety;[24] and goal setting for skills deficit.[25] Effective methods incorporating these approaches for overcoming communication apprehension have been developed for individuals,[26] speech centers,[27] and semester courses.[28,29]

The problems of the CA student appear to be important to both the individual and the higher education institution. According to the findings of this study, CA students prefer small campuses as well as majors and degrees that seem to involve less communication activity. Both tendencies restrict the student to limited life choices. The CA student may also drop out of school prematurely and affect college enrollment. Recognition of the detrimental effects of CA by advisors, faculty, and administrators is necessary. Further exploration of the high school speech course in relationship to amounts of CA may be helpful in diminishing CA in higher education students. CA students of all ages can benefit by programs for prevention and alleviation of CA in elementary, secondary, and higher education.

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